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Global drug traffic — in very high places

By Charles Wheeler
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For the past six years James Mills has taken great risks in an unprecedented and mind-rattling documentation of the corruption that global drug traffic brings to a number of nations, including the United States.

Mr. Mills has been eye-to-eye with what he describes as "assassins, torturers, secret agents, drug-army leaders and billionaire drug bosses . . . some of the shadiest, most intriguing, most otherworldly people I have ever met."

From CIA and National Security Agency sources also comes his new book, "The Underground Empire — Where Crime and Governments Embrace," which provides the staggering dimensions of drug traffic:

- The inhabitants of the Earth now spend more money on illegal drugs than on food, housing, clothes, education, medical care or any other product or service.

- The international drug industry is highly destabilizing to the world economy with annual revenues that exceed half a trillion dollars — three times the value of all United States currency in circulation.

- Illegal drug profits deposited in banks around the world draw interest exceeding \$3 million per hour.

- Drug traffickers have almost as much trouble moving their money as they do moving their drugs — a load of cocaine or heroin generates currency weighing five times as much as the drugs. The "Samsonite suitcase currency-measure" is often used: Two Samsonites filled with \$100 bills equal \$1 million.

- In 1983, an average of 1,500 people each day entered American banks clutching bags and suitcases containing \$10,000 or more in small bills, mostly from illegal drug sales.

- There is more money on deposit

in Swiss banks from tiny Caribbean islands than from Canada and West Germany.

- Drugs are exported from Colombia and Mexico at a rate equal to 75 percent of those nations' total annual export revenues.

- The underground narcotics empire includes 33 countries and the Palestine Liberation Organization, all of which have highly placed government officials participating in drug traffic.

From early 1980, when Mr. Mills was permitted to witness the inner workings of a now disbanded Drug Enforcement Administration operation called Centac — "the most unorthodox, effective and least-known police organization in the world" — until the book was finished, he traveled unknown thousands of miles and spent more than \$500,000 of his publisher's and his own money.

The result is 1,165 pages that, considering the implications for agents as well as criminals, make an unusual promise to the reader: "Everything in this book is true. No names have been changed, there are no composite characters, no invented scenes or dialogue."

Mr. Mills, a former UPI reporter and associate editor of Life magazine, is perhaps best-known for his novel "The Panic in Needle Park," which described the world of New York City heroin addicts.

Standing 6 feet 3 inches tall in his black cap-toed shoes and gray pinstriped suit, the author seems more like a Wall Street banker or a senator from New England than the chronicler of a sundry cast that still amazes him by being so consistently forthcoming.

"Though I never hid from anyone the fact that I was writing a book, often they refused to believe it. They just assumed that a writer could not possibly be where I was, doing what I was doing — therefore, I was not a writer," Mr. Mills said. "Almost all of them — agents and criminals — seemed to want to make sure that I met everyone, saw everything, got it all right."

The information revealed in a recent New York Times story, alleging that Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, Panama's powerful military head, is involved in drug trafficking, weapons smuggling and money launder-

ing operations, has been known by U.S. government officials for some time, Mr. Mills said.

"It's really the tip of the tip of the iceberg — that story on Noriega could be done and will be done on the leaders of at least half a dozen and maybe as many as 25 or 30 nations," he said. "I mention 33 nations in my book, and it's hardly a short list."

"While I was doing this book, I was always figuratively looking around, thinking, 'Where is everybody else?'" Mr. Mills said. "I mean, leaders of national governments as international criminals? That's quite a story, and there was nobody around and I couldn't understand why nobody else was doing the story."

He began gradually to understand the immense foreign policy and diplomatic pressures not to blow the whistle on crooked officials of other countries.

"What you always hear from the

State Department is: 'We have a lot of very important interests in those countries — military bases, intelligence operations, trade agreements. It's not just drugs, and if we come down on them for drugs they won't be there when we need them,'" Mr. Mills said. "You hear that and hear it and hear it."

"Often you get two men arriving on the doorstep of a national leader. One is a DEA agent with handcuffs and the other is from State or the CIA with roses," he said. "The roses always win and the DEA guy puts his tail between his legs and gets lost."

The number of U.S. government officials corrupted financially by the underground drug empire is "infinitesimal, very small," Mr. Mills said. But he fears another type of corruption — intellectual and moral — that he says is far more prevalent and dangerous. "I'm talking about the concealment of what's really going on."

"One thing about the drug business that undermines the will and authority of this nation has nothing at all to do with drugs, but has to do with the unwillingness of our government to be honest," he said. "It makes us make erroneous decisions — you can't make a decision when the information you are using is a lie, is incorrect. A government that does that as a matter of national policy is corrupting itself."

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No president since Richard Nixon has been willing to take the necessary step to stop drugs from entering this country: tell officials of drug-producing countries to stop those activities and mean it, Mr. Mills said.

"Nixon told Turkey to stop allowing heroin to be produced inside their borders, and they stopped and stayed stopped. I'm not blowing Nixon's horn, but we don't have anybody who will say, 'Stop it!' to Burma, which produces more opium than any country in the world, or to Thailand or to Pakistan or to Mexico. And nothing is going to happen until a president makes that statement."

The biggest lie told to the American people, according to Mr. Mills, is that the ongoing effort to stop drugs at the nation's borders is effective.

"In six years, I never met one person — trafficker, agent, anybody — who thought the administration's war on drugs was anything other than a joke," he said. "It's strictly a PR operation with fast, high-visibility operations, lots of seized drugs and lots of arrests that make the 7 o'clock news and the newspapers.

"It is a politically motivated program based on a falsehood: that you can effectively address the drug problem in the United States by stopping drugs at the border. That is absolutely untrue," Mr. Mills said.

Despite naming still-active drug lords in his book and detailing their criminal efforts, Mr. Mills says he and his family are not endangered or threatened.

"All the people named in the book have been known for years to police agencies. It's just you and me who are always the last to hear," he said. "These people have nothing to fear from the law, they are above the law or they are the law, so they certainly have nothing to fear from a journalist. Do you think Gen. Noriega worries about journalists?"

Mr. Mills does take some precautions, though. He will not tell where he lives, other than to say it is abroad. And any questions about family are politely turned aside. He has no illusions about the type of people he is reporting on.

"I think it's a real good-and-evil thing — when you get right down to it, it's the evil in the world vs. the good in the world, and the motivating factor behind all of it is greed and power," Mr. Mills said.

While professing no strategy for dismantling the underground empire he has detailed, Mr. Mills does suggest a first step.

"People say to me, 'What should we do? What's the answer?' and I say, 'I don't know, but I know what the first step is and the first step is honesty,'" Mr. Mills said. "The most I would hope for from the book would be that it provoke a little honesty."